

Partners - Aminatou Sow & Ann Friedman

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Ann: Feelings.

Aminatou: Yeah. Feelings, feelings.

Ann: I don't know if we had sort of an acknowledgement at that point that things were strained between us, but we were definitely not as close as we had once been by the time that that was happening. And part of this period of time is about the weird duality between becoming recognized as friends more publicly, even as we were spending less time in that kind of intimate communication that really makes a friendship feel safe and secure. I don't know, does that feel right to you? Sorry.

Aminatou: That feels so right. Please be my spokesperson for everything. Thank you.

Ann: I'm Ann Friedman. Co-host of a podcast, *Call Your Girlfriend* and a journalist.

Aminatou: And my name is Aminatou Sow. I am the other co-host of *Call Your Girlfriend* and the co-author of the book, *Big Friendship* with Ann Friedman.

Hrishikesh: Aminatou Sow is a media strategist who was named to *Forbes'* 30 Under 30. Ann Friedman is a journalist whose writing has been in places like *The New York Times*, *Elle*, and *The Guardian*. They've been best friends since 2009, but for most of that time, they've lived on opposite coasts.

In 2014, they started co-hosting the podcast, *Call Your Girlfriend*—whose tag line is "a podcast for long-distance besties everywhere." It gets hundreds of thousands of listeners. They record it from their respective homes, just like they did for the interview for this episode.

But maintaining a friendship across the country, and across a professional collaboration, hasn't always been easy. The geographic distance between them turned into emotional distance, and they had to find a way to re-connect. They've co-written a book about it, called *Big Friendship*, which comes out in July. But that project is just the next chapter in their story, which started over a decade ago. Here's Aminatou.

Aminatou: Ann and I met at a *Gossip Girl* viewing party in Washington, D.C. in 2009. *Gossip Girl* was important then. It is still important today.

Ann: That party was hosted by our mutual friend, Dio. She specifically invited both of us to that party, having already identified that we would probably get along and be friends.

Aminatou: In the same way, that someone would set you up on a blind date romantically. This was like a friendship set up.

Ann: I do remember just feeling like every comment and every joke and every little, like, aside or contribution she made to the kind of meta conversation happening about the TV show was just spot on. And just being like, I could be here forever and listen to every single word that comes out of this woman's mouth.

Aminatou: I just really liked your outfit, Ann.

Ann: Wow.

Aminatou: I was like, "Yes. Finally, a good outfit in this town." I remember that being really important to me. But I just remember really appreciating that this person was both hilarious and also smart. Then, much later when I connected the dots to the fact that, "Oh, you were the Ann Friedman whose byline I had read before," I was like, "Great. Everything makes sense now. Of course. This woman who wears this jeans and t-shirts situation so perfectly also has like 10 out of 10 tastes in teen television." It worked out really well for me.

Ann: It just was easy right away.

Aminatou: And so things escalated very fast.

Ann: We really went zero to 100 in the first couple of months. When I picture this time in our lives, I just picture us spending dozens of hours on one of our couches. We just spent so many hours doing nothing. In that way, it felt very much like a college or a teen friendship to me.

Aminatou: Our 20s were very much marked by a lot of big group hangs. But I think for me that when I knew that we were going to be friends for a long time is when it was okay to be like, "Actually I don't want to be doing that. I just want to be taking our bras off on the couch and just talking about mundane stuff or like reading side-by-side, not really saying anything to each other."

Ann: I had been living with a boyfriend and we broke up when you and I had been friends for six months or something like that. Then, when I went to

revise my HR paperwork at work, like who is your next of kin or whatever they make you put down for work emergencies. At that point, it was very clear that it was you.

Aminatou: Yeah, by that point you were someone in my life where I was like, "Give her my 401K. Please call her if I slip on a banana at work. This is the only capable person in my life. Thank you.

Ann: Your job at the banana factory.

Aminatou: The people need to know. If I'm found in a ditch somewhere, I hope that my phone literally says, "Please call Ann Friedman." But we have now been friends who live apart for much longer than we were friends who lived in the same city. I knew that eventually you would move because we lived in a very transitional kind of city. And we had talked about it, it was like the great recession, people move to go to jobs anywhere in the country. So it was not like it was a surprise that one of us would have to move. It just felt too soon.

Ann: And it's funny when I think about making that decision, it was so wrapped up in work for me. Even though obviously I was physically leaving our ability to spend all these hours on the couch together. I didn't feel like our friendship was going to end or even be existentially threatened by the fact that I was moving away. And that's not to say that I wasn't sad about it or that it was easy. It was just at the time it really just felt like, "Okay, we're going to be as close as we ever were. It's just going to look a little different."

Aminatou: I was devastated when you moved away Ann, and I remember very consciously having to make a choice of like, "I will never show this person that I am bummed out by this" Because I knew just how important it was for you and I was also really excited for you that you were actually on a path to do something that you wanted to do.

Ann: "I don't shine, if you don't shine," is something that I think Amina first said to me and then we would say to each other mostly I think as an assurance when one of us was worried she was taking up too much space in the other's brain or life or whatever. Maybe asking for too much support or help, a way of reassuring each other that we were invested in each other and I don't shine if you don't shine was the assurance that underpinned a lot of those conversations.

Aminatou: I have always felt that collaboration is better than competition. Every success in my life is a testament to that.

Ann: And somewhere along the line we started calling it Shine Theory privately. And then in 2013 I was a columnist for The Cut and wrote about it in a

column and lots of people read and shared the column and then it became a lot bigger than we had anticipated.

Aminatou: Like all things that go viral, there are also a lot of complications where you're like, "Great, is everyone really on the same page about what we're talking about?" I remember much to my surprise and horror shinetheory.com had already been bought. A woman who ran a fitness studio was using it to push some sort of miss fitness studio contest.

Ann: My name was on the website.

Aminatou: And so a lawyer was hired. And I think that having to go through this experience with you Ann, I make decisions differently when I'm making decisions with someone than I do if I'm making them for myself. You really learn that people have different appetites for negotiation. People have a different style that they want to be combative or not combative in and whatever. I think that having to sort out a lot of those kinks through this process illuminated a lot of things. And one of them being like, "Okay, this really sucks, but I really like the person I have to do this with." It was important to me that we were able to make a decision this big together. And it was like, you know, that was not falling apart.

Ann: The point at which we were trying to figure out what to do about the Shine Theory trademark was actually several months or maybe even dragged out for like more than a year. And that period of time... I don't know if we had sort of an acknowledgement at that point that things were strained between us, but we were definitely not as close as we had once been by the time that that was happening.

Aminatou: I think that we were entering into a period where a lot of things that we were compartmentalizing were starting to become problems.

Ann: We were both changing and going through really hard things in our own lives, very far apart, physically and emotionally in most cases.

Aminatou: And I think for me also, this has been the central lesson that I am learning as I grow up every day. People are changing every day constantly. And it is really hard to do a check in every day and realize that you are different than you were yesterday. And so I think that even if we were living in the same city or we like bought a house together and we were roommates or whatever, I still think that we would be two different people. Clinging onto an idea of who I think someone is is very reassuring. But in that, you don't give people room to change their minds or to explore new things or to do new things. We were different and we didn't acknowledge it at the beginning, and then we were changing and didn't realize that we were changing. And there was so much to account for in that gap.

Ann: And so for each of us, deciding to share less of ourselves was sometimes a conscious and sometimes a totally unconscious, reflexive decision. And yet we had all of this communication related to hosting a podcast together.

Aminatou: For years and years and years the only podcast that I listened to was This American Life. So it never even occurred to me that it was something we could do. But I had met Gina Delvac through Ann and some of Ann's friends in LA and at some point somewhere in Palm Springs, between probably drugs and wine for me it was suggested that we could do a podcast.

Ann: I think she was just like, "You guys have good chemistry and you should think about doing this." And I am also pretty sure we said that standard thing that I hear most people who are women say when you suggest they record themselves, which is, "I hate my voice, why would I do that?" Or something like that. I'm pretty sure we were kind of dismissive, but then also that we thought about it and talked about it and several weeks later, do you remember when we were in the car and you bought the URL on your phone?

Aminatou: Yes. We came up with the name in the car. I confess that if I had really sat there and thought for longer than 30 seconds the show probably would not be called Call Your Girlfriend. It would be called something else.

Ann: Indeed.

Aminatou: But, this is how we work. Nothing is real unless there is a website. Nothing is real unless you've had a meeting about it. And Gina had done all the work to say, "This is what we think it could be." And because she did that it made me feel like we could actually do it.

Ann: We didn't think that tons of strangers would listen to it.

Aminatou: I think that a huge part of the show's success, honestly, is that we backed into all of these things. If they had come to me and said, "Hey, do you want to run a small media company where we have to get a government EIN and we have to do payroll?" I would have said, "Absolutely not. Please never speak to me again. This is not what I want to do." It sounds like a really dumb thing to say now, but it never occurred to me that people who were not our friends would listen to it.

Ann: Hi Welcome to Call Your Girlfriend

Aminatou: A podcast for long distance besties everywhere

Ann: Usually we are long distance besties but today we are in the same room!

Aminatou: I know we are cheating and I love it.

Aminatou: But I dreaded doing the show sometimes because whatever, but it was-

Ann: Feelings.

Aminatou: Yeah. Feelings. When we are not communicating well and you add distance to it, that was an issue. Or always thinking, "okay, we'll deal with this later." There was always a small thing that you would deal with later, and then that jar got full and you're like, "Oh, this is a lot of stuff."

Ann: And it happened in so many little ways that we didn't really even fully acknowledge it until things had gotten really bad. And I think part of this period of time is about the weird duality between becoming recognized as friends more publicly, even as we were spending less time in that kind of intimate communication that really makes a friendship feel safe and secure. I don't know, does that feel right to you? Sorry.

Aminatou: That feels so right. Please be my spokesperson for everything. Thank you.

Ann: There was sort of this illusion that we were still in touch in the same way we had always been, even though we weren't actually talking in truly intimate ways about what was happening in each of our lives. We were kind of talking about logistical things for work, or we were talking about the news or pop culture on the podcast. The kinds of conversations that really underpinned our relationship in the beginning just weren't happening anymore with the same frequency.

Aminatou: I knew that we weren't doing well, but I knew that you didn't hate me. The thing that was hard about our conflict is that we loved each other but we didn't know how to communicate with each other. I don't remember what the words were that you said in that conversation, but I just remember the relief I felt when you told me that you didn't feel good.

Ann: "I feel awful," I think is what I said.

Aminatou: Thank you, Ann.

Ann: Yeah

Aminatou: Should have been a scary moment. Should've been like, "Oh no." And instead I was like, "Thank God. Finally, it's all on the table." And I remember just feeling just a huge sense of relief of, great, we are having

a breakdown and we are talking about it. I love it. And so, that's how we ended up at couples therapy.

Ann: Doesn't it feel good to laugh about this now? Ooh, expensive. Every laugh is the sound of thousands of therapy dollars.

Aminatou: We would, I don't know, record the podcast and hang up that equipment. I'd be like, "Well, are you ready to go to doctor so-and-so later?" Show up to therapy, do that really hard work, and also sometimes agree or disagree with the therapist and be able to talk to each other about it. There is something about that that felt like such an out of body experience to me where it was like, am I this grown up? I worked with this person, we are now at our therapist, and now we're going to go home and lay on the floor because this was so hard? If you had not been at those therapy sessions with me, I would not believe that it had happened. But it did happen, and somehow we did it.

Ann: Right. We both still wanted to be there. And I think about that saying about like, "How do you stay married? You just don't get divorced," or whatever. I don't know. I will say that we were both continuing to show up.

Aminatou: In our friendship, I've learned a lot about being someone who doesn't run away from their commitments.

Ann: We felt like this experience we had had trying to repair an intimate friendship that had hit the rocks is not something we saw reflected anywhere. So, there was a motivation, I think, to try to put some of this down in words. I think we started to talk about writing a book proposal in maybe 2017. Does that sound right?

Aminatou: Yeah. When it came to audio, neither of us knew what we were doing and it was very much like, "Okay. Great. We're starting from scratch." And with this, you know, Ann is a writer. And I'm her friend, but I'm also her fan. I've read Ann for years. It was thinking like, "How is this collaboration going to work?" We sold this book as we are two co-equal authors and I was like "Great. I'm paired up with an Olympian and now we have to do hurdles."

Ann: A lot of books that are co-written in this 50/50 way have chapter one is by one person, and then chapter two is by the other person, and they volley back and forth. We made a choice pretty early on that we wanted to have one narrative. And so as a project, it is really impossible to disentangle our various inputs. I don't know. I feel like that feels truer to me in the sense of that's really what a friendship feels like. The way we did that is we outline together quite meticulously, and then we would take a section of the outline, split up. We'd each write narratively that section of the outline on our separate computers, and then we would each read aloud what we had written to the other, and then we would knit them together

and keep the best parts of both, and then move on to the next section of the outline for 70,000 words.

Aminatou: Wow

Ann: Can you believe we did that? I'm just saying that out loud. It's wild.

Aminatou: My truly favorite moments of our writing process is when I would be frustrated or ready to give up and I would look around and you were typing away furiously with your signature Ann Friedman typing noises and exclaim out loud, "I love words." Those were the moments-

Ann: I can't believe you're outing me like this.

Aminatou: I am outing you. You are a Capricorn writer and it is disgusting to be a part of, but also, I'm like, "We did it!"

Ann: My favorite moments were hearing you from the other end of the house be like, "Okay! Okay!" I can tell you we're really working through something. You had really had a breakthrough. One thing that is truly consistent across every year of our friendship is that I always do want to know what you think. I always do think you have the best jokes. That has never, ever changed.

Aminatou: Same, Ann. Same.

Hrishikesh: Aminatou Sow and Ann Friedman are partners. Go listen to their podcast, Call Your Girlfriend, at callyourgirlfriend.com. Get their book, Big Friendship, at bigfriendship.com. And read about Shine Theory at shinetheory.com. Like they said, Nothing is real unless there is a website.

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